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reports

editorial

Time's up: your career's over

At the end of one tiring day, during which every email, phone call and meeting added exponentially to my usual workload, a subscription to a concert series ensured that the evening would be better. Conductor Sir Neville Marriner with the orchestra of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields were the highlight of this series, and as Brahms' Fourth Symphony washed into my aural system and purged the stress that had accumulated throughout the day, a stray thought surfaced in my mind: the conductor would soon celebrate his 80th birthday. Yet he was still performing beautifully and the orchestra responded to him and made this evening a memorable event. If he had been a white-coated scientist working in a laboratory somewhere in Europe, this would not be possible. In research, the genius of the experienced leader is disposed of readily in most European countries, even though the same does not apply to musicians, politicians, businessmen and other professionals—which is strange to put it mildly.

In the USA, Australia and some other countries, it is seen as discrimination to dismiss someone on the basis of age. Is it not time to accept this principle in Europe too? From the individual's perspective it is, of course, clear that anyone who wants to retire should be allowed to do so. Work takes its toll and as we have only one life we need to find the right balance between the pleasures of professional achievement and those on a more private level that are often postponed during the course of a career. Family, for instance, has the habit of not waiting around until there is time in our schedule for it. Those old enough to remember the words of Harry Chapin's song *Cat's in the Cradle* have known for some time the denouement of delayed attention. So I am well aware that working forever is not necessarily the best choice in life, but I am equally convinced that obligatory retirement is cruel for some and often is a loss for society as well.

It is obviously essential to ensure that those who stay in the system do not just take up office space but also remain productive. And that is the hard part if there is no obligatory retirement age. Who decides that Professor A should clear his office for Doctor B to move in? Perhaps the answer can be found in external judgement systems, particularly those of publications and funding agencies. If an elderly scientist is able to maintain a regular output of papers, then by definition he or she is contributing to knowledge and to society. If a scientist can convince a funding agency that he or she is the right person to deliver on a grant proposal then, again, it is valid to let this person continue research as before.

The counter-arguments usually focus on the need to free up positions for younger colleagues, and the belief that these positions should be available to them as early as possible in their careers. I agree that there should be more turnover at the top of departments or institutes. Indeed, from many examples, it would seem that such a rotation should be obligatory. There is nothing more paralysing for an institute than a head who does not know when to leave the helm—and those ancient mariner captains will not go voluntarily. But this does not necessarily mean that department heads have to be forced to stay away from their workplace if they fulfil other criteria of usefulness, preferably decided on externally. Often, a change of office might be all that is needed, not a change of occupation. The financial argument that the system cannot afford to pay the senior staff also seems to be weak. If we take into account that they would receive pensions instead of salaries without further contributing their abilities to knowledge and society, then the overall cost of keeping the most experienced staff members might be very low or even less than sending them home.

But would it be seen as inappropriate if the senior scientist competes successfully for grants, thereby stunting the prospects of younger colleagues? I strongly believe that all funding decisions should be made on the basis of quality. If the better proposal comes from somebody who would have difficulties jogging, then so what? The younger scientists generally have multiple advantages: more recent training, which means that they should have a better skill base; a greater ability to learn new facts and to integrate them into new hypotheses; a lower likelihood of becoming overattached to a particular theory; and probably more energy. If they are still not able to compete successfully with a colleague who "should be retired", then it probably says a lot about both applicants.

A final argument for a change in attitude in European countries is that we simply need all the scientists that we can get to deliver on the expectations and needs of society. It has been calculated that by 2010, Europe will have a deficit of 700,000 scientists and engineers. But the trends are such that fewer students are entering science in Europe, and there is no rescuing wave of manpower moving into place to take up this slack. And yet, the system here forces scientists who are eager to continue working to retire! It does not make any more social sense than it makes personal sense.

So, let us look at the example of Sir Neville Marriner, the many great scientists in the USA and the leaders in many other domains and end this outmoded system of obligatory retirement on the basis of age. Let the individuals decide what suits them and, if that is a benefit to their milieu, welcome them to extend their commitment to their work and their passion in life.

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